

(Preliminary draft for review, suggestions and correction)
(Some footnotes not yet included)(Please don't disseminate)

(Title) Is MASATHVSETS a Spelling Error on
Colonial Massachusetts Silver Coinage?

By Eric P. Newman

All varieties of genuine Massachusetts Willow Tree, Oak Tree and Pine Tree silver coins have T instead of C in the third syllable of MASATHVSETS. This spelling seems otherwise unknown. Such varieties also have a single S instead of SS following MA as well as a single T instead of TT following E. There must have been some reason in 1652 and for 30 years thereafter for such an unusual spelling to exist and to continue. Many have noticed this curiosity and wondered about it but to my knowledge no one has specifically written about the issue or undertaken to explain it.

The use of the "Massachusetts" as a geographical name in the official documentation leading up to the granting of the Royal Charter dated and sealed on March 7 1628/29 was "London's Plantation in Massachusetts Bay in New England"¹, referring to the organization as a commercial venture, but the name was forthwith modified into a political entity entitled "Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in Newe England".² The spelling of Massachusetts in these fundamental instruments is exactly the same as that customarily used for the name Massachusetts as a Colony, Commonwealth or State, whether alone or as Massachusetts Bay. It is well known that the place name Massachusetts is derived from the name of an Algonquin (Algonkin) native American tribe living in the

Bay area centered at Boston, the tribe's name being referred to by the English colonists as "Massachuset", since the native Americans did not then spell out their words. Only a single t is used in spelling that tribal name.

The first coinage of Massachusetts Bay was made generally but not precisely according to the May 26-27, 1652 General Court authorization, having a small NE punched for identification purposes into one side of a smooth round silver disk and a denomination in small Roman numerals punched into the other side. A minters' oath prepared by the official committee on June 11, 1652 spelled the jurisdiction as "massachusetts". A specific wording for the coinage was provided by the October 19, 1652 order to use "Massachusetts" in the legend. Yet the spelling on the coinage became MASATHVSETS IN NEW ENGLAND AN DOM 1652 XII on the shilling (The VI and III pence pieces having appropriate denominational changes). The text was continuous from one face of the coin onto the other with the obverse containing the first two words running in a circular border; the reverse containing the next four words (two being abbreviated) also running in a circular border; and within the center of the reverse were the date in Arabic numerals and the denomination in Latin numerals. It was a combination of English and Latin words. The V in MASATHVSETS was the customary Latin letter form for the vowel U. (Insert illustration) The word "Bay" in the charter was not included. Drawings attached to the records are somewhat unclear as to spelling but emphasize layout suggestions.

(Insert illustration)

In an effort to divide the text as evenly as possible between each face of the coin the obverse was arranged to contain the first two words (spelled MASATHVSETS IN) using 13 letters exclusive of spaces, punctuation and ornamentation instead of 15 letters in MASSACHVSETTS IN exclusive of spaces, etc. This solved the crowding of the obverse, but not affect the substitution of T for C. The reverse included NEW ENGLAND AN DOM, using 15 letters exclusive of spaces, etc. This crowded the reverse substantially, usually causing NEWENGLAND to be cut in the dies without a space between the words and often a similar crowding resulting in ANDOM. Such practices indicate how conscious the diemakers were of space conservation and the need for reducing the number of letters wherever possible. For the lower denominations being smaller in diameter, the situation was even more of a problem.

It therefore seems understandable and logical for the diecutters to cause an original elimination of the double letters of SS and TT in Massachusetts as that would leave the phonetics unchanged and save two letters, resulting in the name being more readable. Variations in spelling were not then considered of great importance as long as the phonetics were clear. In the official records of the October 19, 1652 coin design specifications the spellings of CLIPPING, PEICES and YEERE were used in one document and CLIPING, PEECES and YEARE were used in another. Similarly the charter of the Colony used NEW at first and NEWE thereafter as has been previously mentioned.

There are however many examples of a single t in place of tt in later 17th century and early 18th century paper money. In the paper money (Bills of Credit) of Massachusetts Bay Colony issued December 10, 1690; February 3, 1690/91; November 21, 1702; November 21, 1708; May 31, 1710; October 14, 1713; May 26, 1714; and their subsequent redatings through 1740 using modified original engraved plates the spelling is also "Massachusets" with only a single t and not tt, except in the 1 shilling bill of October 14, 1713 where tt is found. The June 1722 issues and those thereafter printed from type or new engraved plates use tt in "Massachusetts". An unusual spelling error is found on the 15 shilling bill of the January 15, 1741/42 issue and the redated printings from its plate where ss is used twice so that the text reads "Massathussetts".

The detailed Henry Popple atlas published in London in 1733 uses a single t in "Massachusets". The foregoing examples indicate that for a long period of time the single t was used in place of tt as a common spelling alternative.

Of extreme scarcity is the misspelling of Masachusetts using the single s instead of ss except on the silver coinage.

The use of single instead of double letters does not relate to the mystery of why T was substituted for C as the fifth letter in the word MASATHUSETS on the coinage. Due to the fact that this strange spelling of MASATHVSETS was used on intermittently coined Massachusetts silver from 1652 for over 30 years and during four more or less consecutive seven year minting contracts with Hull and Saunderson one would expect a spelling correction to have been made

if it was an error, particularly if anyone called attention to it.

Before undertaking to analyze the spelling problem it may be worthwhile to try to distinguish voluntary spelling changes made by the diecutters or their superiors from involuntary spelling errors made through the negligence, illiteracy or inexperience of the diecutters.

The extensive and excellent research on the Massachusetts silver coinage by many authors³ includes in detail the spelling variations, word usage, spacing between words and shape of letters. This seems necessary to review briefly in order to determine what spelling is deliberate, what spelling is unintentional and the reasons if any for the results.

The only exceptions to the spelling of MASATHVSETS on the many dies used for the coinage are on two Pine Tree shilling obverses. In variety Noe 11 the spelling is MASATVSETS, omitting the H as the sixth letter, is clearly a diecutter's error. In variety Noe 12 the spelling is MASASTHVSETS in which there is an additional S as the fifth letter also is an obvious diecutter's error. Noe calls specific attention to these errors.

As to other spelling changes on the coinage the Oak Tree 6 pence variety Noe 16 has the word IN moved from the obverse to the reverse and substitutes ANO for AN DOM on the reverse. Oak Tree 6 pence varieties Noe 20, 21, and 22 also use ANO in place of AN DOM on the reverse. Since the Oak Tree 6 pence formerly known as variety Noe 19 (now known as fabrication Noe OC) has been shown to be a 19th century forgery there is no significance to the fact that

it has IN on both obverse and reverse, the forger having copied the obverse of one genuine variety and the reverse of another genuine variety.

In all Oak Tree shillings except variety Noe 2 and in the larger diameter Pine Tree shillings the reverse die uses DOM, whereas in Oak Tree variety Noe 2 and all small diameter Pine Tree shillings DO is used in place of DOM. In the Pine Tree 6 pence coins AN DO is used in place of AN DOM and in the Pine Tree 3 pence coins ANO is used on one reverse die and then eliminated thereafter. In the Willow Tree 3 pence only A D is used. In the Oak Tree 2 pence dated 1662 the abbreviation is entirely omitted.

It may be concluded that (a) the reduction of AN DOM to AN DO; ANO; and to A D, as well as to its elimination and (b) the moving of IN from one face to another and its elimination are all due to an effort to save space for the more important lettering because of the reduced diameter of the coins on which these changes are found. When the 19th century forgeries of Pine Tree shillings were dated 1650 instead of the proper date of 1652 a spelling enigma for the confused forger was created. Sylvester S. Crosby condemned these pieces as did Sidney P. Noe. In Crosby fabrication variety A1 the forger used the spelling MASSACHVSETS, using SS instead of S and using C instead of T. In recutting that obverse die into fabrication variety Crosby A2 the forger in trying to correct his error to that on genuine coinage changed the C to T but did not try to change SS to a single S. Fabrication varieties Crosby B and C were more carefully prepared by the forger and the

particularly as to those who had little training, education or to improve the appearance of their product.

Thus the most difficult spelling problem remains, namely the substitution of T for C in MASATHVSETS. The phonetic sound is completely different. No other positive substitution of T for C in the name Massachusetts has been located elsewhere in capital or small letters. As to the cause of the apparent error consideration must be given to the possibility that the handwritten documents presented to the minters were miscopied for transmission or misread after delivery. Each scrivener of documents at that time had his own irregular style of writing and the chirography or hand writing formation varied drastically from person to person, making it very difficult for one to read the writing of another.

Fortunately there is evidence to consider. Selections from the manuscripts of the Massachusetts mint documents reproduced in Crosby are illustrated to show how indistinctively and inconsistently th and ch actually were written.

(Illustrations)

It will be noticed that t followed by h is not crossed at the top and is a vertical stroke and that the c followed by h is not always curved but is also formed by a vertical stroke. Each reader should reach his own conclusion as to whether c could have been misread as t in the document delivered to the mintmaster.

The ease with which the letter c in "Massachusetts" can be misread as t is well demonstrated by an examination of issues of the Massachusetts paper money. The issue authorized January 15,

1741/42 consisted of 14 denominations ranging from 2 pence to 40 shillings new tenor. Copper face plates were hand engraved with complex artistry and detail to help deter and detect counterfeiting as well as alteration of bills to higher denominations. The words "Massachusetts Bay" were properly spelled and enlarged with respect to other parts of the text. They were engraved in different styles of lettering and in different positions. The face plates for the issue were redated 1742 and redated again June 30, 1744 for further authorized issues. An examination of the known bills from such issues reveals that c in "Massachusetts" is in open oval form in most denominations but the 4 pence, 1 shilling and 20 shilling bills have almost vertical uprights and virtually horizontal upper crossbars. A comparison of these styles of lettering which are based upon older writing forms shows how easily the letter c can be mistaken for t. A comparison of the examples of the uncurved letter c with the tt in the last syllable of "Massachusetts" shows how easily the letter c can be misread. In these situations the cliché is true that one picture is worth one thousand words and several pictures make shorter reading. The same writing styles were more poorly formed when written by hand and much more difficult to read. Even though this paper money corollary is almost 90 years after the original misspelling on 1652 coinage it is very strong circumstantial evidence because of the persistence of the same writing style.

To the extent of the author's findings the only identical spelling to that found on the coinage (MASATHVSETS) or on a

description of the coinage is the 1928 printed publication of a transcript of a manuscript dated July 1, 1659 composed by Christopher Holden in Rhode Island entitled "A Warning from the Spirit of the Lord". Its salutation was read as "People of The Masathusets Bay." This transcript contains the single s in the first syllable and the letter t substituted for the letter c in the third syllable. Fortunately the original manuscript from which the transcript was prepared survives in the Boston Public Library. An examination of a photocopy of the manuscript shows how easily a 17th century American colonial document can be misread. Portions of the "Warning" are illustrated. There is no doubt as to the single s in the first syllable but severe doubt as to the first letter of the third syllable in Masa?husets. A comparison between the two letters transcribed as t shows them to have definite differences. While the straight uprights are the same height and there are similar left side projections, the first has a curving left side element and no crossbar to the right of the upright into the following letter h and the second has a crossbar continuing to the right into the following letter s. Examining comparable letter formations in the manuscript it can be noticed that the small letter c has a straight upright and various shaped small crossbars in "according", "actions", "Scriptures", and "Suffice" and none showing any curvature. The first C in Church is rounded because it is a capital letter beginning a word, but the second c has a straight upright and no crossbar extending into the following letter h. When in the manuscript the letter t is followed by the

letter h the sweep of the crossbar flows into the following letter h as shown in "their", "they", "things", "these", "hath", "wrath", "further", etc. Yet there is no crossbar sweep into the letter h in Masa[?]husets. The ease with which a transcriber or reader can misread the letter before h in such a document is obvious.

The 1659 document which at first seemed to justify the existence of Masathusets being spelled the same way as on the coinage has turned out to be otherwise and shows that inconsistent letter formation probably caused a misspelling by the transcriber.

The same problem apparently faced the mint workers in 1652 and they easily could have made a similar mistake.

As to why the first letter T on the coinage was not corrected to the letter C over the 30 years of die making there can be several explanations. It is well known that the date 1652 was never changed in making new dies during that period. This excludes the one die for the Oak Tree 2 pence which began and remained with a 1662 date and was strengthened by recutting during its many years of use. Thus the retention of the 1652 date and T for C went hand in hand. In a strict interpretation of law during that period the coiners might have thought that a specific General Court order or instruction must be followed without deviation. Correcting an official order whether it was thought to be a spelling error or not might have been considered punishable or risky to their coining franchise. A reluctance on the part of the minters to admit an error by correcting it is a natural human hesitancy, particularly in performing official functions. Pointing out such a mistake

might have affected a contract renewal or embarrassed particular individuals. If the date of 1652 was being left unchanged in the preparation of future dies then the spelling in the text was of lesser importance. To let sleeping dogs lie might easily have been the policy. Perhaps the public was so used to the appearance of the coinage that any change might affect its acceptance or cause an increase in its export for melting.

The date of 1652 might have been left unchanged on subsequent coinage dies may also be interpreted as a matter of patriotism and pride. After King Charles I of England was executed on January 30, 1648/49 the royal forces fought on until their defeat at Worcester in England on September 3, 1651. When the meaning of that event reached America the year 1652 was the first year of freedom from English sovereignty and domination in New England. The royal prerogative of coinage was no longer considered applicable and coining in Massachusetts for local use was an assertion of liberty and independence and an opportunity to take care of New England needs in a practical manner. The year 1652 seems to have become for some a patriotic date just as 1776 was later to be celebrated as the year of independence for all of the former English colonies which became the United States.

Another reason in the author's opinion as to why the design and text of the Willow Tree coinage was repeated in the Oak Tree and Pine Tree coinage dies is because they were cut during and intermittently after the year 1660. The Willow Tree coinage dies had probably been cut promptly after October 1652 pursuant to the

seven year minting contract beginning earlier that year. The quality of coinage was so poor that no further dies were ordered cut until new coining machinery could be obtained. That did not happen until 1660 when new machinery arrived and a new seven year coining contract from the General Court was obtained. On May 8, 1660 the restoration of the English Crown and the end of the interregnum took place with King Charles II succeeding to the throne on May 16, 1660. This took place about the same time as Oak Tree dies would have been cut for use with the new machinery. Faced with the English Royal prerogative on coining the minters would have had to consider including in the coinage design the portrait of King Charles II or a text including the king's name or title. Leaving the design and text of the previous coinage unchanged would be much less likely to arouse the Crown's interference or a charge of usurpation of royal power. The minters were not interfered with when the Oak Tree coinage was struck and circulated and the new denomination of 2 pence was added in 1662 recognizing that there would be little English objection and that coinage of the higher denominations would continue. The same conditions of concern existed in 1667 and thereafter when Pine Tree dies were begun and continued until Massachusetts silver coinage terminated about 1682. Thus the entire blame for no change in date and no change in text can be justified on the basis of what was thought by the minters to be diplomatic and to be repeating exactly what they had been doing theretofore.

Whether it is helpful or not to present a problem and not have a clear positive and unassailable solution it is hoped in this instance that readers are challenged to consider or help review and study the problem rather than be given an answer concluding with quod erat demonstrandum (Q.E.D.). Yet the continued uncorrected misspelling of the name of a prominent governmental coinage issuer may be the most spectacular error in American numismatics.

The assistance and cooperation of _____ are sincerely appreciated.

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